

Europe is Stuck Over the Israel-Hamas War

by Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Nathalie Tocci

Since the horrific attack launched by Hamas on Israeli citizens on 7 October and the brutal ongoing Israeli military response, European governments and publics have rallied behind two diametrically opposite worldviews: unconditional support for Israel's right to self-defence versus solidarity with Palestinians massacred by Israel's military operation in Gaza. Europe should work proactively to chart its way in this inflammatory debate, rather than passively buying into the polarising narratives from Israeli and Arab public debates and allowing these to sow divisions, paralyse action, hamper credibility and poison democracies.

Europe's baffling response to the war

Europe has been shooting itself in the foot in three interrelated ways. First, it has been hopelessly absent in the attempts to put out the fire in this brutal war. The European Council's attempts

to strike a balance, acknowledging Israel's right to defend itself "in line" with international humanitarian law came after days of European cacophony and sounded weak; furthermore, they were almost immediately superseded by a threefold European split at the United Nations General Assembly over a resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Sure, the United States' approach has not been a stellar success either. Not only does the US role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represent a structural element that took us where we are today, but it has also so far failed to moderate Israel in any meaningful way. Its public embrace of Israel while nudging and asking tough questions behind closed doors hasn't yielded any significant results thus far, while the death toll in Gaza rises by the hour. But the Biden administration, starting with the President himself and the tireless work of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, must be

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credited at least for trying, rather than simply stopping at the public shows of solidarity towards Israel as seen in the case of the string of European leaders travelling to Israel in the first days after the attack without any meaningful impact then and ever since. Europe is a passive spectator of this conflict and a passive recipient of its polarising narratives, which undermine European security and ambitions to play a global role.

Second, European divisions over the Middle East suddenly made the show of a united foreign policy front over Russia's invasion of Ukraine look fragile. War in the Middle East and the divisions it has caused in Europe have not directly triggered division or "fatigue" over the war against Ukraine. They did, however, expose and magnify the "fatigue" narrative that has latched especially on those in Europe who had always been only half-heartedly committed to Kyiv's cause for freedom.¹

Third, the overarching backing by European governments and institutions for Israel, and consequently for its military response in Gaza, has literally wiped out the (already dented) European credibility in large parts of the world. As known, Israel's military onslaught is translating into unspeakable Palestinian deaths, dispossession and destruction, violating those norms

¹ The Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in a telephone conversation with two pro-Putin self-professed "comedians" whom she believed were the President of the African Union, explicitly referred to "fatigue". That conversation took place on 18 September. It is no coincidence that the recording was released after the outbreak of war in the Middle East, when the debate over Western distraction and fatigue started mounting.

of international law that Europe wished to uphold denouncing Russia's aggression on Ukraine. As a result, to Russia and China's delight, Europe's claims to be on the right side of history and international law now appear painfully hollow and hypocritical in the eyes of countries in the Global South. Although for Europe (unlike the US, which provides military assistance to Israel), there is no policy tradeoff between support for Ukraine and for Israel, the tradeoff in the public and political debate exists. Never has there been such a sorry display of European double standards than in the parallel wars unfolding in Ukraine and the Middle East today, confirming all the criticism and stereotypes about Europe, from its racism to its Eurocentrism and neocolonial practices.

A war fuelling divisions in European societies and politics

Europe's response is baffling. It is neither principled nor interest-driven. It undermines European security and credibility in the world. But why are the European Union and most member states so manifestly shooting themselves in the foot?

Beholden to a binary view of the conflict, Europe has trapped itself in a corner. European societies are deeply divided over the Israeli-Palestinian question, with expressions of antisemitism and islamophobia reaching unprecedented heights. Right-leaning governments, parties and sectors of society support unconditionally Israel's military response in Gaza, buying into the Israeli narrative that what happened on 7 October in Israel could take place

in European societies too – thus totally erasing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the equation, Hamas' attack is portrayed as the product of Islamist radicalism and terror, analogous to the terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States in past years, just at an entirely different scale and gravity. As many recalled in the early days after Hamas' attack, 7 October was not "just" Israel's 9/11 – in relative terms, given Israel's size, it was far greater. The "Hamas is al-Qaeda or ISIS" slogan propagated by Israel and bought by many in the West has reawakened the "war on terror" narrative as well as Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" prism for viewing the world, in which, faced with an existential danger, all means are possible and legitimate. For those who have bought into this story, the mounting number of Palestinian casualties is quickly brushed over as an unfortunate inconvenience. If these are unavoidable victims of an existential war – given that Hamas uses them as human shields, so the narrative goes – there is little to be done about them. And if the rest of the world disagrees, then so be it too. It is a matter of life or death; therefore, going with the global flow is not an option.

Those who read the unfolding drama in the Middle East through this lens tend to erase the political context of the conflict, viewing it as secondary at best and an unpalatable expression of antisemitism at worst. The problem is political Islam and terrorism. Therefore, given the growing presence of Muslim communities in Europe, European countries should counter migration, double down on anti-terrorism and unconditionally back Israel as the

frontline state in a civilisational battle for survival.

On the other side of the spectrum, left-leaning groups as well as migrant communities have backed the Palestinian cause unconditionally, to the point of papering over Hamas' war crimes, if not legitimising them as an unfortunate yet necessary act of resistance against Israel's 56-year-old occupation. Legitimate criticism of Israel's occupation and its brutal war on Gaza rapidly spills into and is overtaken by broader ethnic, religious and class grievances against the political establishment, increasingly targeting the existence of Israel and even degenerating into episodes of antisemitism. Governments, at a loss over what to do, have gone as far as banning pro-Palestinian demonstrations tout court, in an unprecedented restriction of democratic freedoms.

While happening miles away from Europe, this conflict drives at the core of European politics and society, exposing and accentuating the risk of a backsliding of its democracies. Space for European citizens to denounce both Hamas and Israel's killings is shrinking. Polarising worldviews have gained traction fuelled by rising populism on the right and on the left, eroding the basic principles of coexistence.

Europe's need for a political solution

To counter this binary framework, there is no other place to start than to rekindle the fraying European consensus over a genuine two-state solution and, above



all, actually begin, for the first time, to use the limited instruments at the EU's disposal to promote such a goal. The route that Europeans have embarked on to date – passive support for Israel, camouflaged as a European variant of Washington's "hugging Israel close" – can only lead to greater catastrophe. If a true friend to Israel, Europe should be a good counsellor. Hamas' brutality and Israel's unprecedented intelligence failure have undermined the credibility of Benjamin Netanyahu's government and prompted it to focus on revenge, eliminating Hamas and maintaining indefinitely a security control of Gaza, with no political plan in sight. A focus on the military objective with no credible political plan for Palestine and Israel-Arab relations is a recipe for disaster, as much for Israeli security as for Palestinian rights.

Meanwhile, the collective punishment of Palestinians has mobilised the Middle East against Israel and shelved its normalisation in the region, while bolstering Iran's legitimacy and that of pro-Iranian groups as the true defenders of the Palestinian cause. With every day of death and destruction in Gaza, Israel is less secure.

Together with the United States, Europe needs to deliver a political plan for the Israel-Palestinian conflict rather than remain trapped in polarising worldviews generated by violence. That starts with actively supporting Arab diplomacy and engaging with states in the region that have a stake in the Palestinian question (Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia), while countering Iran's support for Hamas' military actions. The US and Europe

should reinvest in a political plan that aims at embedding a two-state solution in Israel-Arab normalisation. Expecting Israel-Arab normalisation to move forward by turning a blind eye to the Palestinian question has already been tried, and 7 October was the result. It is high time to acknowledge this and reinvest seriously in Israeli-Palestinian peace. What is at stake is not only Middle Eastern stability but Europe's own future.

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